

Soldiers by EvieSmallwood

Series: Lost Moments [3]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Dad!Hopper, bonding moment, i love these two so much

Language: English

Characters: Jim "Chief" Hopper, Mike Wheeler

Relationships: Eleven/Mike Wheeler (mentioned), Mike Wheeler & Jim "Chief" Hopper

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-12-04

Updated: 2017-12-04

Packaged: 2022-04-03 05:09:31

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 1

Words: 767

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

Hopper's always been a firm believer in the past staying where it should be. He's never itched to get caught up in a time that doesn't belong to him. Better to focus on the present; on what's right in front of him, happening exactly as it does.

The present happens to be scattered boxes, piles of sorted belongings, and one very dishevelled teenage kid.

or:

Hopper and Mike go through all the crap in Hopper's cabin.

Soldiers

The dust settles on the ground as Hopper pulls the lid off of yet another unlabelled box. Inside is a stack of papers—all wrinkled and slightly browned from years of weathering and sitting untouched.

He starts to finger through them. Plenty are letters; from his grandmother to his grandfather, or his great uncle, or his great-grandmother... He's never read them, and he doesn't exactly care to.

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Michael Wheeler, who somewhere along the line just became '*Mike*', scratches the back of his head. "Does this look important?"

Hopper takes it and scans it over. "Jesus," he breathes. "That's the deed to my dad's place."

He hadn't ever thought he'd see that again—especially not *here* of all places—but so many things had wound up tucked in that storage space.

Mike suddenly looks interested. "Is your dad still around?"

"No," Hopper replies. *And thank God for it.*

He sets the paper into a 'maybe' pile, because he hasn't been back there in years. Even though his folks are long gone, and there's really nothing to see... *maybe*.

He looks up at the kid, who's watching him intently. Mike looks away like he's been burned, re-focusing his attention on the many envelopes and cards in his lap.

He's an interesting kid. A smart one, too. Sometimes more of a smart-

ass than anything, though. But he's got a good head on his shoulders, and a good heart. Maybe too good.

Hopper fingers a cigarette from his shirt pocket and glances at the clock. It's past five. El should be home from her sleepover with Max in about an hour or so.

Smoking away his anxieties doesn't really work, but he's always trying anyway.

"What are these?"

The kid is holding a long silver chain, brow furrowed. Hopper scoots a little closer, taking them. "It's been years since I've seen these," he mutters. They're cold in his palm.

The kid is still waiting. Hopper glances up. "These are my dog tags," he says. "From 'Nam."

They still read his name, in fine pressed letters. JAMES HOPPER.

No one called him James but his grandfather.

"You've really never seen dog tags before?" The kid shakes his head. "Yeah, I guess not. Your dad really isn't much of a military man, huh?"

Mike bites his lip. "They wouldn't let him because of his eyesight, or something," he explains. "But I don't think he could have done it, anyway."

Hopper gives him a once over, taking in the too-long, slightly curly hair, the freckles, the gangly limbs, and the flannel he'd grabbed off the back of the couch. It's too big on him. He's fucking *skinny*. "Take 'em."

Mike's eyes widen. "What?"

Hopper holds them out. "I don't need them. You take them. Bring you good luck, or something."

"Good luck," the kid echoes, taking them. "Why do you think that?"

"I wore them everyday and made it out," Hopper explains. He remembers, still, the way it smelled there. He remembers the sound of his best friend dying. Remembers the blood on his hands as he'd tried to stop it from happening.

Mike slips the tags around his neck. "Thanks. Sir. Thank you."

Hopper hides his grin behind his hand. He goes back to sorting through papers, while the kid reads the infinite stack of 'get well soon!' cards, all pink and teddy-bear riddled and toxic. *Get well soon, Sara!* from her grandmother. *Get well soon, Sara, dear!* from her aunt. *We love you! We'll see you soon!*

Hopper eyes the pink, floral box not far from either of them. He sees that Mike is doing the same.

"Do you miss her?"

It's like a punch to the stomach, mostly because it's not the question he expects. He refocuses on Mike, who's still looking straight at that box, face too sad for his own good. "Every day," he says.

Mike nods, like he gets it, and it takes Hopper a minute to realise he sort of does. He knows what it's like to feel strangled in your own skin, itching for someone you can't have, remembering and replaying every moment.

"I'm sorry," is all the kid says.

"Yeah," Hopper sets a letter in the trash pile. "Me too."

Author's Note:

This was an idea I just couldn't get out of my head. I had to write it, even though it's ridiculously short. These two need all the bonding fics they can get.